

1973

TNT [with Response]

James Welch

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Recommended Citation

Welch, James and Jack Myers. "TNT [with Response]." *The Iowa Review* 4.4 (1973): 82-84. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.1570>

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TNT

James Welch

Jack Myers' poems are both interesting and exciting. There is a difference if you think about it—you've read poems that have interested you without exciting you, and vice versa (more rarely). Sometimes you're more interested in the poet than in the poems, more excited about the things you've heard about the poet than the poems. Luckily for me, I don't know a lot about Jack Myers (although I've met him and like him), so the poems are the thing.

A funny thing happened while I was reading the poems: I realized that he "sets" them against a domestic situation, some more than others, but all in degrees. And I realized that I don't particularly like poems that deal with domestica (also a popular cheap Greek wine). But I liked his (was interested and excited) and, not being an overachiever, wondered why. Normally I like poems in which some sapsucker is drinking himself silly or wallowing in self-pity or -abuse. So I started to study each poem in an attempt to figure out why I liked them. (I should say what I mean by domestica: anything to do with wives, walls, parents, apartments and babies.)

Maybe the first thing I noticed was Jack's ability to time a poem so that when he hits those last two or three lines you really feel the power that has been building up. I'm thinking in particular about "Leaving." The first three and a half lines are depressing (what could be more depressing than the moving of families through necessity?); then, the poem moves into a kind of wistfulness, the "voice" (Myers) taking his son to see the beautiful bathers enjoying a kind of taunting freedom; but wait—next thing you know, the man and his son are running "flat-out" (an image you can really see, the little kid running like a bat out of hell) "to win that final letting go." And they make it—matter of fact, they can't stop, they're leaving, going, going, the ideal way to move.

All of the above happens within the space of seventeen lines. That's what I call timing, not to mention using the exact perfect images to keep the poem moving to its exhilarating climax. Myers uses almost the same form in "How to Get Outside." This time he ("voice") is addressing his wife; together they spent "the best years of our life inside a cage" filled with "responsibility." (What could be more depressing than responsibility, unless it's families moving?) Then the language begins to change, becomes more intense—"wail," "screamed," "blew/ a blue note to its limit," "straining," "break/ this house apart." Myers is getting up momentum. All of a sudden, it's "Come on, let the hard years fly. . ." "Imagine that train . . . is roaring through right now." Moving again, again that kind of exhilaration. It's like running the 440—you have to pace yourself in the beginning, pick it up in the middle and finally leg it down the backstretch like a house afire, holding nothing back. Jack Myers, the 440 man of modern poetry.

"The Family War" is something else again. The form is different—a little longer, divided into three stanzas—but the voice is also different. In the beginning

it is calm, informative, almost conversational. I read this part of the poem with the same interest I had when my boyhood friends would talk about what their dads did during the war. Then toward the end of the second stanza, he addresses his father directly. And the third stanza is all directed to the father. And you realize that this isn't just another "what the old man did during the war" story; it's a "what the war did to the old man" poem. And the odd part of it is—the father was doing domestic stuff during the war, stirring "enormous pots of s.o.s.," making stew. What I like about the poem, but especially about the last stanza, is that the "voice" is not accusatory; it is presenting images, although the images become increasingly terrifying. There's a lot of sexual stuff going on in this poem, but I won't get into it, partly because I don't trust my judgment in these matters, and partly because I get embarrassed. I like this poem the best because of its unfamiliar, yet familiar drama—it is *déjà vu* to me and probably to a lot of other "war babies." War is debilitating even to those families outside the battle zone.

I don't know what to say about "The Ant Makes Progress Towards Himself," except that I don't think it's really about an ant. I've seen nearly everything but I've never seen a talking ant. So I think it's about poetry and poets. The third word of the poem leads me to that conclusion. It's tough to talk about something you don't really understand but like. And I like it. Jack does something here that is really hard—using outside images to stand for something that is going on inside. It is terrifying, but not in the same way as "The Family War." It is more terrifying, I think, because it is happening inside, it's something that you can't walk away from—the tunnel will always be there and when you break through, why, there you are again, "the blackness shining at the end." Maybe what I like about this poem is that it does what poems should do; that is, reveal to us something about ourselves in such a great, complicated way (because we are complicated) that we can't reduce it to lazy explanations—what's the word, when you dissect a poem—extrapolation? Exegesis? Anyway, we'd have a hell of a time with this one.

As I said in the beginning of this essay, Myers' poems are both interesting and exciting. He manages to transform domestic situations into "that final letting go." And this is important. So many poets write about these situations with a thin edge of hysteria trembling beneath the surface of the words—and they're not getting any depth, they're just not saying what they mean. Jack Myers does. His poems are loaded with TNT.

Jack Myers' Response

I'm glad Jim Welch has decided to dub me "the 440 man of modern poetry" because it picks up on one of the limitations I've had to write under—too little time. These small poems, or "completed fragments" as one editor put it, were almost all conceived at one sitting, then refined in the next few. The green light

sessions took place before I went to work, when the kids took their naps, or late at night if I had enough beer to get back into myself. Since I haven't sensed any continuum in my life over the past several years, and because this isn't the age of protracted odes to grief or folly, it just wasn't in me to write a book-length sequence or post-adolescent epic. So I've settled for pursuing the rain of everyday events which, God knows, has become my life. I never thought of these poems as "domestica," but simply what I was into. Now that I see Jim's perception of them holds true as an overview, I'll send the heavies off to *Ms.* and learn to live with the knowledge that if I sprinted well I did it to get out of the kitchen.

In terms of timing, I think I'm working out changes that take place concentrically, each according to its own rate of time. There is the eternal, the ephemeral, and the accumulated force of small events which change what you are. So the poems deal with process, not necessarily things. I know what I am by writing about what I've just been through.

For a long time I had little contact with the outside world, so I wrote magic-myth-and-dream poetry. Then I married, had kids, and was forced to deal with the twin war machines of reality and responsibility. You write from where you are, about where you are, and hope to drive deep enough through clichés into revelation. All this brings me to the internal workings of the poem, its Originality, Risks and Excellence (the recognized standards for judging international ice skating competition).

I'd like to believe I'm running on an oval track, but the fact is when the gun goes off I don't know where I'm going. I'm given a few associative connections, maybe a face, and the overwhelming feeling that something's happened which I'd better understand because at the end of the race I'm supposed to explain it. Time is short, so I trade in endurance for the possibilities of getting there by leaping down straightaways and driving deep through potholes. It's backwards, but it works for me. The form of the poem, its structural grace, depends on how important the race is, whether I'm up against the lightweight in me or it's the big one. I usually slug it out through relationships and jog through jobs. My strides or line lengths depend upon the general control or breathlessness I maintain during these self-interviews. The important thing is, as my brother once roared over the noise of the crowd at a high school track meet: "Finish it, you bastard!"